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Book Review

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Felix Nicolau's *Morpheus: from Words to Images. Intersemiotic Translations* contributes to an area of translation studies which mirrors much more closely what we see happening in our surrounding world than studies in intralingual and interlingual translations do. This is because, as the author acknowledges, words are no longer the only or the most important signs that communication between people builds on; on the contrary, they seem to have been pushed towards the edge of the range by non-verbal signs such as paintings, drawings, graffiti, graphic poetry, music, theatre, ballet, etc. that have gained ground as means of conveying thoughts and emotions. It comes as no surprise then that itersemiotic translation or transmutation, i.e. the "interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of non-verbal systems" (p. 14, quoting Venuti 2004: 139) or the transfer of "categories of non-verbal signs into other categories of non-verbal signs" (p.14) has claimed, more and more convincingly, its deserved place in translation studies. It undoubtedly fits here as long as, Nicolau stresses, "the rules of the game are the same for different types of translation dealing with different signs" (p. 17) – the intersemiotic translator, be him/her visible or less so in his final product, a faithful follower of the source or a traitor in this respect, ultimately aims at transferring a message originally delivered in a certain code into another code, in a way that is meaningful to its receivers.

Nicolau's book is tuned to a trend in translation studies that is still rather innovative as compared to the bulk of mainstream research (yet, as I said, very much

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in line with the variety of facets that communication takes at present), though a small part of the book focuses on one canonic topic, too: the translation of poetry, in the chapter entitled *Collaborative and transnational translation: 'Margento'*, dedicated to pointing out difficulties and ways out of them chosen in the translation from Romanian into English of the poems collected in *Nomadosophy: a Graph Poem* (2012).

The work under scrutiny also has the merit of shedding light on matters that have been little talked about by Romanian scholars and not that far back in the past (see publications by Brînzeu (2001, 2004, 2005), Grigorescu (2001), Grigorescu and Vrânceanu (2002), Vrânceanu (2007, 2011), Ionescu (2007), Pungă and Badea (2018), Suciu and Badea (2018), etc.), though (mainly) western European and American voices have made themselves heard quite poignantly in similar areas, for quite some time now.

The author dedicates attention to a number of such matters.

Before proceeding to more concrete topics, he develops on awareness that has been commonplace in interlanguage translation, namely that context, not only textual, but also extra-textual, plays a vital role in the translation process. Transferred in the sphere of intersemiotic translation, this idea is exploited by Nicolau by reference to how various generations, from X, Y, Z, C to yuppies and hipsters, both interpret (i.e. "translate") reality based on their own beliefs, attitudes, principles, and life style and convey non-verbal messages that they expect, in their turn, to be interpreted (i.e. "translated") by others as signs of the same beliefs, attitudes, principles and life style. Thus, to give just one example of those offered by the author, members of generation Z, for instance, are interpreted as being "screen addicts, diagnosed with a deficit of attention […], gadgetized and dependent on social media sites, […], victims of non-selective, fanatical consumerism, and of cheap narcissistic exposure of private lives, […] known to seek instant validation and acceptance through social media" (p. 33), but, nevertheless, able to "more easily navigate the dynamic job market" (p. 34). They themselves translate reality relying on "financial security and more personal freedom than it was demanded by the previous generation" (p. 34), generation Y, whose translation of reality "comes in terms of comfort, entertainment and conformist stability" (p.32).

A number of chapters in Nicolau's book spotlight the translation-related nature of the transfer between words and images of various kinds. Ekphrasis, "an ancient vivid description created by the Greeks" (p. 55) is one of the cases in point. It presupposes, as a starting point, the existence of an image (usually, a piece of art) or an object with peculiarities that stand out as worth being talked about. Both of these, the author explains, may be either real – like Pieter Bruegel the Elder's painting "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" that served as inspiration for Auden's and William Carlos Williams' poems, or Turner's flamboyant painting "The Slave Ship" that John Ruskin described in *Modern Painters*, in a "luxurious style" (p. 57) perfectly matching his source of inspiration; or only imaginary – as Achilles' shield

depicted in Homer's *Iliad* and later, in Auden's *The Shield of Achilles*, may have been.

As remarked previously, intersemiotic phenomena cover transfer not only between non-verbal to verbal signs or vice-versa, but also between different non-verbal sign systems. I would add here, and this is one thing that Nicolau takes into consideration too, that same sign systems can also generate intersemiotic transfer. In the area of images, this may mean that one painting, for example, is reinterpreted and serves as the raw material that is poured in a new mold and thus gives birth to another painting, a phenomenon that the author illustrates with the reworkings of Velasquez's *Las Meninas* by Picasso, and more recently, by postmodern artists. "In these circumstances, the original painting becomes a symbol and it functions as a mediator between signs and images" (p. 72), Nicolau says.

Meaning hidden in paintings may be captured in pieces of another of the belle arte – music. To illustrate this, the readers are offered the example of Modest Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, inspired by painter V. A. Hartmann's works – a series of ten movements characterized by tempos perfectly matching the images on canvas.

Graffiti is yet another form of image-based expression that may lend itself to semiotic interpretation. Like paintings, they represent signs that may be transferred into words, even when they contain words themselves, or, in Nicolau's acceptation, "we have to consider graffiti an art form which necessitates translation" (p. 58). Depending on the spraying technique applied, the medium in which they occur, the theme tackled, the colours used, the dimension of the drawings, etc., graffiti convey meanings and implications, so that nobody could negate their communicative core and, "in judging it, we have to interpret and translate their codes and messages" (p. 59).

Human skin, as uncommon as it may seem for some, is one of the media via which pictorial signs transmit messages. From a not very often visited corner, Nicolau brings to light the idea of skin calligraphy, as it acquired contour in British director Peter Greenway's movie *The Pillow Book* (1996), inspired by the homonymous book written by Sei Shonagon, in 1002: the main character, Najiko, a Japanese woman writer whose work is rejected by a publisher as being worth less than the paper it is written on, decides to claim his attention by sending her manuscripts calligraphed on human bodies instead of paper. She surely succeeds in achieving her aim – her living artefacts become as famous as the texts they "carry" – "the support of the writing and the type of writing in this example are at least as important as the written message, if not more important" (p. 76). Moreover, in the last of these, suggestively entitled *The Book of the Dead*, Najiko "accuses the publisher of blackmail, corruption and impunity and squarely transmits her message of death" (p. 75) to him, thus managing to impress the man to the point of him slitting his throat.

From a much more often visited corner, the author brings into the limelight "another field with intersemiotic implications, […] that of tattoos" (p. 77). He talks about a number of them and insists on their standardized, generally accepted or

culture-bound significance (e.g. stars, angel wings, the sun, alligators, but also Buddha's eyes or footprint, the Buddhist Knot, the eye of Horus, etc.). The main point that Nicolau makes here is that, if there is some widely admitted way of interpreting tattoos that are not rooted in a specific culture, for those that are so, the "modern world offers twisted translations, […] in an exercise of paraphrasing and recontextualization, but also demythization" (p. 77) so that "all in all, in our globalized and corporatist world, tattoos represent, more often than not, an instance of ignorance or incomplete knowledge, at least" (p. 86). Frequent mistranslation of ancient symbols thus occurs "within the frame of a linguistically and anthropologically impoverished world" (p. 86).

Another context in which an innovatively set correlation between language and images works towards putting meaning across is concrete poetry, in which the words are arranged in shapes "which illustrate the poem's subject both pictorially and through their literal meaning" (p. 91) – this is the case of, the readers are told, for instance, "The Mouse's Tale" in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, a poem whose lines are crafted so as to appear on page in the form of a mouse tail (the play on the homonymy "tale" – "tail" is obvious), of the poems written by the Brazilian poets of the Noigandres group and later on, by geometric poetry writers such as Dylan Thomas or E. E. Cummings. Taking into consideration the peculiar, intimate bond between form and content, "in the case of texts with a specific layout, translation is supposed to reflect the image as part and parcel of the meaning. There is no accurate rendering of sense unless the translator is able to recreate the text-image pattern" (p. 95). This holds true for "translating" pictograms, ideograms and logograms, in whose case, "a similar relation between text and image exists" (p. 101).

The translator's mission further complicates in a peculiar context in which images and words are set against a musical background - video poetry, a "new genre of technology-assisted poetry" which "consists of displaying poetry on a screen simultaneously with the aforementioned syncretic juxtaposition", in an attempt to "conjugate the process of thinking with the simultaneity of experience" (p. 97). Intersemiotic translation is rather complex in this situation, as, unlike in concrete, graphic poetry, in which images and words fit together perfectly, here, the image – words – sound relation is disrupted, "one of refraction, not reflection, which is the equivalent of adaptation and allusion in the arsenal of translation techniques" (p. 97).

A more traditional, yet not always less unpredictable connection is established between literary works and ballets or movies. The former case is detailed on departing from the *Dracula* ballet, the "choreographed version of Bram Stoker's novel" (p. 116). What is directly worded or merely implied, but still evident in the book, is suggested by different means on stage: e.g. a background screen which changes its colour from neutral to blood red suggests Lucy's falling under Dracula's spell, as does the change in colour of her costumes – "from an innocent pink to ever deeper tones of red" (p. 119); the rhythm of the dances on stage reflect the intensity of the performance (novel) episodes; "the music of the ballet proposes an obvious melody and then distorts it to reflect the twisted world of Dracula" (p. 120), etc.

Nicolau's choice to illustrate the latter are two movies based on Shakespearean plays: Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* (1996) and David Richard's *The Taming of the Shrew* (2005). Like in the *Dracula* ballet, the intersemiotic translation method used in the two screen productions "consists of preserving the core of the original message, whereas the peripheral elements […] vary surprisingly" (p. 132), so as to fit the contemporary audience for which they are meant: e.g. in *Romeo + Juliet*, the Montagues and the Capulets are rival corporatists running businesses whose headquarters are located in "steel-and-glass skyscrapers facing each other" (p. 128), the Capulet youngsters "are figured as Latin, outrageous guys", but all characters still speak Early Modern English. *The Taming of the Shrew* features a Member of the Parliament Katherine, ridiculed for her fits of rage, in sharp opposition with her younger, glamorous sister, Bianca. Petruchio also gets "updated" – to a drag queen who shows up at the altar for his wedding to Katherine "in high heels, net stockings, a kilt, and an open blouse that makes his hairy chest visible" (p. 126), etc.

Nicolau's book closes with a convincingly well formulated conclusion that captures the essence of what it sought to demonstrate, i.e. that "the process of translation implies transferring thoughts and ideas from a source medium to a target medium. It is only about signs and contexts. The red-hot disputes about the nature and dignity of signs should be the domain of the past. Climbing to an absolute level, there is no qualitative distinction between interlingual translation and intersemiotic translation. The same message can be transferred to various sign-environments with the help of a large range of translational techniques and equivalences. The world has become a translatable structure in the epoch of synchronized devices" (p. 137).

Made up of well-articulated parts as building blocks of this final conclusion, *Morpheus: from Words to Images. Intersemiotic Translations* addresses a rather specialized than lay audience, a public whose knowledge of translation issues and cultural background are above average – apart from the topics discussed themselves, the specialized terminology and the rich bibliographic resources resorted to require a more than superficial contact with the fields they represent. Instead of insisting on a single topic, the book rather opens up a number of avenues that are certainly worth exploring further (especially as far as intersemiotic translation that is not imaged-based is concerned), which makes it all the more thought-provoking.

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